

*Citation for published version:*

Hordern, J 2021, 'Why close to practice is not enough: neglecting practice in educational research', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 47, no. 6, pp. 1451-1465. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3622>

*DOI:*

[10.1002/berj.3622](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3622)

*Publication date:*

2021

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Hordern, J. (2020), Why close to practice is not enough: Neglecting practice in educational research. Br Educ Res J. which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3622>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

**University of Bath**

## **Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# **Why close to practice is not enough: neglecting practice in educational research**

**Jim Hordern**

**Department of Education, University of Bath**

[j.hordern@bath.ac.uk](mailto:j.hordern@bath.ac.uk)

**Orcid ID: 0000-0002-2933-7593**

## **Abstract**

This paper draws on normative conceptualisations of practice to reconsider the relationship between educational research and educational practice, enabling a critical commentary on the recent British Educational Research Association statement on close-to-practice research. It is argued that the portrayal of practice in the research undertaken for the BERA statement is limiting, with a tendency to view educational practice as amounting to whatever activities current practitioners are involved in. Such a view can overlook practice purposes, accountabilities and dynamics, and elevate certain forms of knowledge production that ignore core educational concerns. Instead, it is suggested, educational research should reconsider its role within a normative conception of educational practice, with the aim of making educational research more educationally meaningful.

**Keywords:** theory-practice relation; educational practice; educational research

This is an author's copy of the following published article:

**Hordern, J. (2020) Why close to practice is not enough: neglecting practice in educational research. *British Educational Research Journal*. [doi.org/10.1002/berj.3622](https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3622)**

## Introduction

The imperative to ‘improve’ educational practice courses through much educational research. Global educational reform initiatives assert that there are ways and means by which activities within educational institutions can be improved in the interests of outcomes for pupils and the effectiveness of national education systems (Sahlberg 2016; Schleicher 2011; Tatto 2006). This has led in countries such as the U.K. and U.S.A to a situation in which funding for educational research activity is increasingly orientated towards identifying those policies, strategies and interventions that are seen as most likely to deliver those desired outcomes (Paine 2017; Furlong and Whitty 2017). Meanwhile, debates about the substance and purpose of education are often glided over in the pursuit of ever more rigorous research methods, a process that has tended to foreground certain specific objectives for educational activity and relegated others (Biesta 2009). This changing landscape has led to proposals for significant change in the governance and organisation of research (Royal Society and British Academy 2018), and re-fuelled longstanding debates within academic educational research communities around how to maintain relevance and engagement in policy (McCulloch 2018). Meanwhile, new research organisations enter the market ready to provide the research outputs required by governments and other powerful bodies intent on enhancing the efficacy of education. It is said that high quality research about and for educational practice is required, but ‘high quality’ appears to be increasingly defined methodologically, rather than in terms of insight into practice itself.

Within this changing landscape, and cognisant of some of the criticisms levelled at educational research, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) recently initiated a project intended to ‘illuminate dimensions of quality’ in ‘close-to-practice’ research (BERA 2018, 2). This focus on ‘close-to-practice’ appears to have emerged as a consequence of some of the outcomes of the UK-wide Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise in 2014 and the ‘perception that the very highest quality research’ is found in studies which are ‘about education’ rather than in research undertaken ‘for education’ (BERA 2018, 2). The distinction between ‘about’ and ‘for’ education draws on Whitty’s (2006) differentiation between ‘basic research and scholarship’ which is not always ‘explicitly useful’ (‘studies of education’), and research which ‘is consciously geared towards improving policy and practice’ (‘studies for education’) (2006, 172-3). The research report accompanying the BERA statement (Wyse et al. 2018) provides a concise overview of various research

traditions that are said to contribute to close-to-practice research, and together with the BERA statement suggests improvements in the capacity of ‘studies for education’ to ‘generate reliable public knowledge about practice’ (BERA 2018, 3). This presents a challenging agenda for research which focuses on educational practice, while reinforcing its centrality to educational research.

This paper reconsiders the relation between educational practice and educational research, drawing on normative accounts of practice. This leads into a critical commentary on the recent BERA ‘statement on close-to practice research’, and the research review that underpins it. Drawing on the sociology of educational knowledge and philosophical reflection on the nature of practice it is argued that the statement portrays practice in a reductive manner that overlooks normative and ‘less attenuated’ conceptualisations of practice and also downplays distinctively educational theorising. Rather than attempting to be ‘close to’ practice, educationalists need to reconceptualise education as a practice to which all those concerned with education can (and should) belong, including when conducting educational research. The argument is developed with the use of the work of Rouse (2007), Hager (2013), MacIntyre (2007) and Addis and Winch (2019), which foreground the iterative mutual accountability of practice activities and claims to expertise. Such notions of normative practice can provide a new means for evaluating educational research, and a rethinking of how educational practice is conceptualised so to enhance educational understanding.

### **Normative practice and education**

How we conceptualise ‘practice’ as a phenomenon is a discussion that may seem remote from much educational research. Nevertheless, it is suggested here that important distinctions about how the term is used need to be made. The frequency with which practice is discussed in education suggests that greater engagement with debates about practice as a concept could be helpful, not least in considering the relation between research and teaching. The concept of practice has been elaborated by sociologists, philosophers and organisational theorists in considerable depth, but the parameters of what constitutes a practice vary. Hager (2013) identifies the ‘philosophical lineage’ of conceptualisations of practice from the work of Heidegger, Aristotle, Wittgenstein with significant contributions from Dewey, Brandom and Charles Taylor, in addition to sociologists such as Bourdieu and Giddens. He distinguishes between ‘more attenuated’ and ‘less attenuated’ usages of the term ‘practice’ (Hager 2013,

94-96). More attenuated uses occur when practice is a ‘generic term...for a whole host of disparate activities’ or when ‘any micro-level human behaviours, activities or even actions’ (Hager 2013, 95) are said to constitute practices. Much contemporary work in the social, educational and organisational studies fields appears to be drawing upon such ‘more attenuated’ uses that assume that any activity which occurs habitually could constitute a practice (Nicolini 2013; Lynch et al. 2017). Considerable effort is expended in some of this research to provide rich description of the micro-level activities of practitioners and ‘people’s recurrent actions’ (Lynch et al. 2017, 3), which might include studying a range of ‘routine bodily activities’ or examining the practice of ‘being a competent class student’ (Nicolini 2013, 4). Lynch et al. note the contemporary attention to ‘non-representational configurations of practice that focus on....materiality, embodiment, situatedness and relationality’ (2017, 3), opening up endless scope for finely grained analysis of social and socio-material activities.

On the other hand, ‘less attenuated’ accounts of practice recognise a need to ‘explain the interconnectedness’ of the various components of a practice, and highlight the ‘discursive aspects’ (Hager 2013, 96-97). Practices in less attenuated conceptualisations are seen as more than just individual or collaborative activities, however acutely these activities have been described in the more attenuated accounts. In the less attenuated versions of practice, the criteria for what constitutes a practice assume a need for an explanation for how and why interconnected activities hold together over time. MacIntyre’s work is presented as an Aristotelian exemplar of a less-attenuated account of practice, as it requires practices to be ‘socially established co-operative human activity’ with ‘standards of excellence’ and ‘ends and goods’ (MacIntyre 2007, 187). Whereas the ‘more attenuated’ accounts pose few parameters to the definition of practice and instead emphasise situatedness and contextuality, the ‘less attenuated’ accounts are involved in explaining how purposeful activities eventuate and iterate, and how performances of the practice can be evaluated using appropriate criteria (Hager 2011; Winch 2010). It could be argued that archetypal less attenuated practices would be those that relate to the professions and academic disciplines, although MacIntyre’s (2007) exemplar practices include fishing, painting and chess.

A helpful distinction that aligns with Hager (2013) is made by Rouse (2007) who holds that conceptions of practice can be distinguished between (i) those that are ‘regularist’ and/or ‘regulist’ and (ii) those that are ‘normative’. The ‘regularist’ or ‘regulist’ conceptions of practice are those in which practice ‘participants’ are considered to ‘repeat the same or similar performances’ in a habitual, ‘describable’ form or share common ‘presuppositions’

about their activities (Rouse 2007, 47). In such conceptions, practices are activities which exhibit 'regularities' or which are rule-governed (ibid, 48). Everyday activities within organisational contexts, such as re-arranging a room at the end of a working day or proceeding through the agenda of a meeting, could be considered typically rule-governed. The practitioners undertake the tasks according to shared presuppositions or implicit or explicit rules. Rouse notes the deficiencies of the regularist and regulist approaches, suggesting they offer no clear means for explaining how the substance and identity of the practice is 'maintained across multiple iterations' (Rouse 2007, 47). Observations of regularity of action or of shared assumptions amongst practitioners do not explain how those regularities or presuppositions come about, or how they endure over time. The parallels with Hager's (2013) 'more attenuated' conceptualisations are evident.

Normative forms of practice, however, provide an alternative conceptualisation that reflects 'less attenuated' understandings. For Rouse, practices are 'constituted by the mutual accountability of their constituent performances' (2007, 48), suggesting that practices only maintain where there are ongoing streams of interactions/actions that are undertaken in response to each other. There is a process of 'holding to account' by which interactions are evaluated according to some notion of 'appropriateness' that constitutes the essence of the practice (Rouse 2007, 48). Is an interaction 'appropriate' in the context of previous and other current interactions? Does it speak to the practice? Each 'performance' or interaction thus has particular meaning when seen in terms of its relations to other related performances or interactions. For example, a team of archaeologists deciding on new steps for their investigative fieldwork will understand how proposed courses of action relate to previous discoveries, and thus sense the potential implications of their decision-making. They can hold each proposal for future activity to account in the light of their collective expertise on this and former excavations, conscious of previous practice performances. This relationship between activities also provides a boundary to the practice: where an activity is not part of the stream of responses to previous activities it is not an element of the practice. Normativity is thus constituted through the subtle relations between actions which have bearing on each other (Rouse 2007, 49), forming a recognisable and notionally durable practice. For those who have sufficient grasp of any given practice each interaction associated with that practice will have special resonance, whereas those not initiated in the practice may be unable to interpret practice activity or may need assistance with the interpretation.

The ‘mutual accountability’ of activities within a normative practice can only arise when there is something ‘at stake’ or ‘at issue’ which provides a reason for the activities to develop in relation to each other (Rouse 2007, 51). The activities are collectively orientated towards some general aim or purpose, which may only be partially defined or agreed. This is concomitant with a sense that ‘the definite resolution’ of issues is ‘always prospective’ (51), and thus there is always the potential for practical improvement or greater insight, in the search for ways to achieve the practice purpose. The ‘prospectivity’ provides the impetus for practitioners to constantly iterate the practice – to continue discussions, debates, trials and innovations, as the pursuit of whatever is at stake is never fully settled. Indeed, the nature of what is at stake may itself adapt as circumstances change.

The related interactions and notion of working on an ‘issue’ that is at stake suggests that a degree of special understanding of the practice will develop amongst those practitioners that engage in the practice over long periods of time. These experts are likely to acquire a sense of what are appropriate practice interactions, and to apply implicit criteria for assessing potential contributions to the practice, forming the ‘appropriateness’ by which the ‘holding to account’ takes place. These criteria may become more explicit and consensually agreed amongst groups of practitioners over time, defining what is or is not appropriate performance of the practice (Addis and Winch 2019).

In a similar vein, MacIntyre (2007) refers to the ‘standards of excellence’ by which the practice can be defined and towards which practice activity is directed. These standards can only be established and continuously regenerated through experience of what MacIntyre (2007) calls ‘goods internal to the practice’, which include both the practitioner’s ‘excellence in performance’ (2007, 189) and the intangible or tangible outcome (which may entail a physical product) of the practice. Thus, experience both of the process of conducting archaeology and the outcome of the completed excavation (including its interpretation) are necessary for full appreciation of archaeological practice and the development of appropriate standards of excellence. Furthermore, MacIntyre suggests that practices generate the ‘goods of communities in and through which the goods of individual lives are characteristically achieved’, and thus asserts that integrated within each practice are the processes of ‘shared making and sustaining’ which achieve the ‘common good’ (1994, 288). This shared making and sustaining found in practices will thus tangibly or intangibly generate socially beneficial outcomes. MacIntyre’s definition of a practice encompasses ‘performance arts’, ‘productive professions or crafts’ including ‘architecture or weaving’, technical disciplines such as

‘navigation and military strategy’ and academic disciplines such as ‘physics and history’ (Dunne 2005, 365). All can be said to be generative of the ‘common good’, and encompass various categories of product and outcome.

But are education or teaching normative practices? Noddings (2003), in dialogue with MacIntyre’s work, suggests that teaching is a ‘relational practice’ (241), drawing primarily on the idea that teaching possesses internal goods connected to the growth and development of students. Noddings appeals to the notion the teachers seek to ‘make a difference in the lives of the students’ (247), and that they ‘accept some responsibility for the development of students as whole persons’ (249). The primary internal good is ‘the development of whole persons’ (250), in addition to a subset of goods such as ‘intellectual enthusiasm’ and the ‘challenge and satisfaction shared...by engaging in new material’ (249), and the ‘establishing and maintaining relations of care and trust’ (250). These contribute to the development of ‘distinctive criteria of internal excellence’ (251), which could be ascribed to all forms of teaching and educational activity. Dunne suggests that an argument can be made for education and politics as ‘master practices’ as they are concerned ‘with the human good to be realised by a community as its common good’ and ‘by individuals as the good of their individual lives’ (2005, 370). Thus the internal substance of education is interconnected with broader societal benefits: education fosters individual capability and regenerates ‘the social’. The results and consequences of education, in terms of individuals and groups with a degree of understanding of the world around them and their potential contribution, have value and benefit to all in society. While the common goods of educational activity may not always be immediately tangible (or measurable), they are integral to the practice.

It is important to note that MacIntyre did not consider teaching to be a practice, but rather an ‘ingredient in every practice’ (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 8). Dunne counters this, arguing that teaching has its ‘own specific goods...and standards of excellence’, and that ‘the excellence of teachers is extended through greater realisations of excellence in their students’ (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 7). Furthermore, drawing on the distinction that MacIntyre makes between internal and ‘external goods’ (which include ‘wealth, social status’ and ‘a measure of power and influence’ (MacIntyre 2007, 189), Dunne argues that excessive focus on the external goods provided by education (e.g. ‘test scores or access to occupational pathways leading to high income or status’) ‘threatens the reliable achievement of its internal goods’ (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 7). While the external goods provided through the practice of education may be expected to ‘accrue from accomplishment’ in terms of



achieving standards of educational excellence, the ‘practice can be made instrumental’ if it (the practice) is construed in such a way ‘to maximise the external goods’ (Dunne 2005, 369) to the exclusion of other purposes.

Rouse’s normative conception of a practice can further refine how we view education as a practice. What is ‘at stake’ or ‘at issue’ in educational practice could be seen to be the holistic pedagogical formation of the individual within society, a central educational purpose reflected in much educational theorising (Furlong and Whitty 2017; Hopmann 2007; Deng 2018), although how the formation of the individual is conceived may be heavily inflected by the socio-historical context in which that formation takes place (Alexander 2001). There may be contrasting positions on how that formation should occur through informal and formal educational experience and activities, and on how the relationship between education and societal change should be viewed, but this central educational purpose appears to lie at the centre of much educational thinking. Thus educators and those who seek to develop policies or strategies for education should be expected to have sufficient acquaintance with these debates and ideas in order to provide appropriate responses, and take appropriate action within the practice. There is therefore some form of boundary, however permeable, which delineates what constitutes educational practice: some forms of discursive and practical activity are ‘educational’ and some forms are not. Practitioners, broadly defined, need to acquire a specialised *educational* lens through which educational activity can be viewed as a preface for making judgements in educational scenarios, cognisant of the criteria by which judgements can be evaluated (Addis and Winch 2019).

But what does this suggest about the understanding of those located outside of a practice? It suggests that understanding of the mutual accountability of practice performances will be somewhat limited, as the ‘outsider’ will have only a second hand experience of the discussions and engagements that take place within the practice. An outsider may be able to gather plenty of information about the practice and its measurable ‘external goods’. She may be able to conduct an analysis or evaluation of the practice, which may have considerable value in providing an overview of the practice over time or a comparison with other practices. However, the outsider view cannot substitute for direct acquaintance with, or immersion in, the practice, in terms of making judgements about what is appropriate performance of the practice. Making judgements against practice criteria implies a degree of practitioner expertise and experience of relevant internal goods. Researching a practice implies some commitment to the issues that are at stake, and undertaking actions which somehow respond

to previous actions and decisions made *within* the practice itself. Without a grasp of the normative constraints of the practice, there is limited understanding of why judgements are made and the appropriacy of responses. This suggests also that practice is rarely a dry, intellectual activity. Involvement in any practice may involve not only opportunities to reason but also some acquaintance with practice customs, rituals, histories and adaptations. Any outsider can eventually become an educational insider and potentially a reformer, but this is a transition that requires engagement with educational ideas and acquaintance with the substance of educational practice itself.

### **Practice and the problem of educational research**

If there are definable internal goods and standards of excellence specific to educational practice, then it seems entirely possible to make judgements about education that are *un or non-educational*. Those who have no experience of generating the ‘goods’ and the ‘standards’ are likely to make such non-educational judgements about education. While such judgements may be based on the collection of data through a range of methodologies that may be considered rigorous according to certain disciplines or paradigms, they may nevertheless overlook the internal goods and criteria by which educational practice is defined. Theories about education may be postulated, for example by sociologists, philosophers, or psychologists, or indeed by management theorists or policy scientists, which do not qualify as ‘educational’ theories in the sense that they do not speak to educational purposes or seek to enhance educational internal goods. This does not in any way suggest, however, that *all* such theories are non-educational, only that the possibility exists that many of them are, due to a lack of association with educational practice. What is considered a rigorous and apposite theory in one disciplinary area or practice may not qualify as such in another.

The differentiation between the ‘educational’ and ‘non educational’ in educational research can be further elaborated with reference to the ‘grammar’ of the discipline, and in particular the relationship between what can be termed the internal and external ‘languages of description’ (Moore and Muller 2002; Muller 2007; Bernstein 2000; Horder 2017a, 2017b). The ‘internal language constructs conceptual objects and the relations between them’, while the external language must define what counts as an ‘empirical referent, how these referents relate, and translate these referents back into the internal conceptual language’ (Moore and Muller 2002, 633). A key point here is that disciplines have their own internal languages that

seek to develop concepts that address their own problematics, although the situation as regards ‘pure’ academic disciplines and professionally orientated disciplines is slightly different (Bernstein 2000; Muller 2009). Whereas the ‘pure’ disciplines (i.e. history, physics, mathematics) have historically controlled their own problematics and direction of knowledge production, the ‘applied’ disciplines have to take account of a ‘supervening purpose’ (Muller 2009, 213) or a specific societal role or practice. Medicine judges the value of its research by its relevance to the overarching purpose of improving human health, while civil engineering evaluates research by its capacity to improve the design and construction of major structures and may be sourced by engineers attempting to resolve specific ‘in practice’ problems or cases (Hanrahan 2014). The problematic for such disciplines is thus externally negotiated in a way that is not quite the case for physics or history. However, this does not suggest that such applied disciplines do not have internal languages of description, just that their concepts and procedures are organised to take account of the specific negotiated purpose of the practice and their societal role. The internal language of applied disciplines may also need to be open to modification from knowledge from other disciplinary sources. For example, aspects of medical knowledge may need to be transformed as a result of new findings in the biological or physical sciences.

But does education have an internal language of description? And if the internal language is not immediately apparent, is it necessary to develop one? The argument that there is something ‘at stake’ in educational practice, namely the formation of individuals within society, suggests that there is a reason to develop a coherent internal language by which educational activities can be evaluated over time. The accumulated wisdom and understandings of educational practitioners, including forms of research and inquiry carried out cognisant of the practice, can be organised systematically into an ever iterating internal disciplinary structure which can provide a resource for new educational practitioners. There are strong arguments for the conceptualisation of education, or educating, as a normative practice alongside other human-centred occupations with societal roles such as medicine and social work. But a normative educational practice requires the development of an internal substrate of knowledge and expertise which can form the basis for criterial judgements about activities taking place in educational institutions or within informal education, determining whether they are indeed *educational*.

However, there is little doubt that the internal language of educational thought faces challenges to its coherence and criticisms of its relevance to educational practice. For

example, Deng (2018) has charted the fragmented nature of curriculum theory, and Lawn and Furlong (2010) outline the vulnerabilities of the foundation disciplines of education. In some national contexts schools and departments of education have been attacked for their supposed irrelevance or subversion (Furlong 2013; Labaree 2003). As a consequence, there has been an increasing foregrounding of languages of description originating in other disciplines, accompanied by specific methodological approaches, within educational research. For example, forms of thought that originate in management science or economics and pay little regard to *educational theory* have become increasingly prevalent (Allais 2012; Shalem and Allais 2019), accompanied by methodological preferences. In a less threatening, but nevertheless potentially corrosive manner, new forms of cognitively-based learning science are gaining prominence, seeking to equate education with an instrumental conception of learning as a means to enhance performance (Furlong and Whitty 2017). The overall consequence is the undermining of an educational internal language of description, with current policy or managerial objectives determining what counts as educational research. The educational internal language based on educational theory could be seen as problematic for much global educational reform and for prevalent conceptions of learning emerging from cognitive science, and therefore some may argue that it must be dispensed with.

The idea of normative educational practice has implications also for researcher identity, and how researchers are positioned in terms of ‘practice’. In the normative conception of practice, it is not possible to make appropriate judgements about the practice without becoming a practitioner oneself. It is only if the researcher is committed to the practice, and identifies as a practitioner, that research can be fully attuned to the needs of the practice. The practice requires research to be produced that is responsive to the previous claims and assertions made *within the practice about the issues at stake to the practice*, including the general purpose of education and its commitment to holistic individual formation. Researchers should therefore be cognisant of the central practice problematic (the issues at stake), and aware of attempts to narrow down the focus of educational research to the provision of intelligence to meet specific policy objectives based on a non-educational view of education or to specific notions of learning drawn from cognitive science.

## **Why ‘close to practice’ is not enough**

The implications of the above argument suggest that educational research can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which it contributes to a normative educational practice. This may be determined in a range of ways, including the extent to which the research:

- contributes to furthering understanding of that which is ‘at stake’ in education
- recognises that some practices are identifiably educational, while others are not. Educational practices can be identified through their focus on the holistic formation of individuals in society, foregrounding ‘responsibility for the development of students as whole persons’ (Noddings 2003, 249) and ‘greater realisations of excellence’ in those students (MacIntyre and Dunne 2002, 7).
- acknowledges the role of standards or criteria of excellence developed by a normatively-organised community of educational practitioners.
- conceptualises the researchers themselves as practitioners and co-contributors to the practice
- is responsive to ongoing debates and arguments about educational purposes, rather than ignoring these or assuming that research about education can be undertaken with regard only to specific policy or managerial objectives.

Using the above parameters, it can be argued that the recent British Educational Research Association statement on close-to-practice research (BERA 2018) is not sufficiently adherent to a normative conceptualisation of educational practice. The BERA statement, and the report on the research that fed into its development (Wyse et al. 2018), draw on a conception of practice that is primarily regularist rather than normative. There is a tendency (i) to refer to practice as representing local and specific habitual activities that may or may not be educational in nature, (ii) to demarcate between research and practice as fields of activity, and between researchers and practitioners. There is limited acknowledgement of (iii) what might be at stake in educational practice, or how research might be seen as a necessary part of ongoing work towards practice aims. Finally (iv), despite noting important parallels between education and health as professional fields, the research report and the BERA statement make

assumptions about the necessary methodological orientation of educational research that could undermine the further development of an internal conceptual language about education. These elements, it can be argued, are substantive shortcomings in the BERA close-to-practice (CtP) project, and deeply problematic for how educational research is conceptualised.

The BERA CtP work conceives of educational practice as regular or habitual activities undertaken with some connection to education. Rather than considering the possible existence of shared educational practice with some core characteristics, there is an implicit assumption that ‘practices’ are contextually specific and yet indefinitely variable, with nothing that might necessarily distinguish them from other practices. The educational character that might enable them to be grouped together is not discussed. A ‘broad understanding’ of practice is assumed, and this might include the practice of ‘teachers’, ‘educators’ or ‘other actors in the education ecosystem, (including examiners, education policymakers, curriculum developers and so on)’ (BERA 2018, p.2), and thus potentially any activity connected somehow with education might be considered an educational practice, irrespective of the extent to which the activity has *educational purposes*. Reviewing close to practice studies carried out in the UK, Wyse et al. (2018) list the disparate ‘types of practices’ (18) studied, including a wide range of ‘teaching and learning processes’ which are described as ‘the most common type of practices’ (19), in addition to practices relating to partnership, policy and professional development. The implication is that practice is conceptualised in a ‘more attenuated’ manner, with no attention to the extent to which the activities identified may or may not be connected or driven by a central purpose or educational understanding.

Furthermore, the BERA CtP work suggests a demarcation between research and practice, with researchers and practitioners often clearly differentiated from each other. The assertion is made that there are ‘three groups’ with interests in CtP research, ‘practitioners, researchers and policy makers’ (Wyse et al 2018, p.2), but that their conceptualisation of educational problems may not always concur. BERA has defined CtP research as concentrating ‘on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice’ and involving ‘collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice, or both’ (BERA 2018, p.2), acknowledging that practitioners may also be researchers but suggesting that the activities of ‘research’ and ‘practice’ themselves are separate areas of expertise, which may or may not be related. The BERA statement makes a distinction between ‘small scale investigation...’ that

provides ‘answers that are useful and acceptable to the practitioners themselves’ and the generation of ‘reliable public knowledge about practice’, which must be ‘constructed with sound methodological underpinnings that give confidence in the reliability and validity of findings’ (BERA 2018, p.3). The implication is that ‘reliable’ research requires research expertise, while as a concession it is noted that in high quality work ‘practitioner voices are involved at all stages of the research process’ (BERA 2018, p.3). Interviews undertaken for the CtP work also ‘highlighted the position of the academic, as close-to-practice necessarily also implies distance from, or a lack of involvement in, the practical activity itself’ (Wyse et al. 2018, 29). Practice is primarily conceptualised as a domain of practical or technical activity, as the picture of the worker on the cover of Wyse et al. (2018) demonstrates. Research, however, is presented as offering higher levels of insight or understanding that do not necessarily emerge from the practice itself, even if the involvement of practitioners in that research in some form is advocated.

The BERA CtP Statement also provides limited acknowledgement of the educational purpose of practice or that which is ‘at stake’ in educational activity, and how this could be enhanced by research. Instead educational practice is presented as available for change and transformation by whichever purposes and objectives may be most prominent in a given context. Thus the BERA statement stresses that CtP research ‘focusses on issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice’ (BERA 2018, p.2) in any given context, rather than on the purposes and issues that define educational practice itself. The issues on which research can focus are potentially wide-ranging, but could include ‘a problem in a specific site’ as much as ‘whether and how to use phonics’ (BERA 2018, p.3), with no room for consideration of whether the problems or techniques, as defined, meet the normative expectations of educational practice. Practice is seen as available for ‘intervention’, with practitioner themselves involved in ‘enactment’ (BERA 2018, p.4) of those interventions that have been previously validated by research activity. The research defined as ‘in scope’ for the CtP project demonstrated an intent to ‘make an impact on practice’ and emphasised the ‘cyclic and dynamic iterative process of research and its application’ (Wyse et al. 2018, 16) to practice. The overall impression is a view of practice as having no coherent purpose or structure: instead education is seen as undertaken within a wide range of situated contextual practices. And these situated contexts are shaped by organisational and socio-political factors that may be imperceptible but are nevertheless potent. The ‘issues defined by practitioners as

relevant to their practice’ may well be slanted towards meeting specific policy or managerial objectives, which may not necessarily emphasise educational purposes. ‘Relevance’ here suggests that situated instrumental outcomes will be a priority, and this may not accord with central educational purposes.

In parallel to this view of practice, research activity is often portrayed as a neutral or objective means of validating supposedly beneficial interventions, often obscuring the fact that research can be used as a tool for the authorisation of changes that could undermine the educational character of practice. Research methodologies with varying histories, purposes and assumptions are bundled together under the overall banner of CtP research (Wyse et al. 2018, 14), with limited discussion of what distinguishes each from the other. CtP research is said to be prized for its ‘impact and applicability’ and its capacity ‘to find solutions’ for the improvement of practice and ‘promote meaningful change’ (Wyse et al. 2018, 24). This heralding of ‘usefulness’ and ‘practicality’ (Wyse et al. 2018, 24) suggests that CtP research does not necessarily address educational purposes, but instead could be used to address managerial or policy objectives, which may not necessarily be attendant to or cognisant of educational practice. Many of the sixteen different traditions identified employ methodological approaches that could be used to match up to expectations of rigour and credibility generated within higher education (Furlong and Whitty 2017), but yet support transformation process in which educational purposes could be disregarded.

Does the BERA statement therefore suggest a form of methodological imperialism implicit in the approach to defining research quality? The advocacy within the statement and the CtP research review suggests a prioritising of the development of external languages of description via a set of specific methodologies with little consideration of the ongoing development of the internal conceptual language of educational theory. While sixteen traditions are identified as representing CtP research, certain parameters and characteristics are highlighted as of particular worth. There is an emphasis on the provision of ‘robust evidence’ and the ‘methodological guidance and standardised tools’ available via the ‘Campbell Library, the EPPI-Centre and the EEF’ with the aim ‘to enhance research rigour’ (Wyse et al. 2018, p.10). To achieve ‘high quality CtP research’ there is an emphasis on the ‘robust use of research design, theory and methods to address clearly defined research



questions’ and an ‘iterative process of research and application that includes reflections on practice, research, and context’ (Wyse et al. 2018, p.34). There is a focus on evaluating studies in terms of whether they discussed ‘strengths and limitations of their research traditions’ (Wyse et al. 2018,p.10), in the context of an advocacy for ‘CtP research with larger sample sizes... including quantitative analyses based on statistical probability’, which is currently ‘much less common’ than other forms of CtP research (p.35). Noting the ‘general weaknesses in quantitative research in social sciences’ the authors suggest that education needs to support ‘greater use of quantitative methods in CtP research.’ (Wyse et al. 2018, p.35). While there may be a role for a range of methodologies in educational research, and benefits in a clarity of research focus and design, the lack of discussion of how the research contributes to a stronger and more coherent internal conceptual educational language is telling. There is a risk of a methods fetishism (Bartlome 1994), with sophisticated methods providing impressive ‘results’, but being used to sideline or undermine that which is *educational* in educational practice.

The advocacy of greater attention to method and rigour in CtP educational research partly takes its cue from perceived evidence-based advances in other fields considered related to education. The CtP research review is said to have ‘revealed opportunities for learning from other sectors such as health in which research by, with and for professions allied to medicine (such as nurses, therapists) shares many similarities with that of academics and practitioners in education’ (Wyse et al. 2018, p. 36). Yet there is considerable debate within the health professions about how different research findings contribute to professional practice and how health professionals should make judgements about the well-being of patients (Greenhalgh, Howick and Maskrey 2014; Gabbay and May 2004). Debates around what we mean by ‘health’ and ‘well-being’ and the relative autonomy of patients lie at the centre of such discussion, as much as how evidence is interpreted and used within normative practice communities. Furthermore, the identification of tangible health outcomes from medical research studies is very different from the identification of often intangible learning outcomes in educational settings, unless learning is equated simplistically with performance in tests. The reduction of education to a narrow conception of learning, and then learning outcomes into that which can be assessed by standardised procedures, is a process that may suit particular methodologies but offers an impoverished view of both learning and education, according to the view of education as a normative practice outlined above.

## Concluding remarks

The approach outlined in the CtP statement is strongly influenced by regularist notions of practice prevalent in the social sciences, and this ignores the concerns of normative conceptualisations. Practice itself is not defined in the statement, but it is implied that practice has ‘illimitable scope’ (Hager 2011, 547) and is available for change and transformation in the light of the findings of ‘high quality’ CtP research. As discussed above this is inherently problematic as it has the potential to undermine the normative conditions of educational practice and substitute it with a set of claims about educational activities that are designed to have argumentative weight via their methodological sophistication. This undermining comes about as a consequence of breaking the mutual accountability of claim and counter-claim within educational theorising, the sidelining of the central purposes of educational activity, the skewing of purposes towards narrow conceptualisations of learning outcomes, and a lack of commitment to standards of excellence which can arbitrate *educational* research quality.

An alternative approach, valuing the normative conditions of educational practice, would seek to establish criteria of quality and standards of excellence for educational research which would involve a demonstrable commitment to that which is at stake in educational practice, namely the holistic formation of individuals within society. Rather than narrowing or masking debates about educational purposes in the design of research or the discussion of findings, such longstanding debates with their associated conjectures and refutations must be present (Popper 1963). This conception of educational practice should incorporate all those who are engaged in educational activities, including those who seek to study those activities. Other forms of distinctly sociological, psychological or historical research about education are valuable *to education* only when they take account of the requirement to consider and respond to central educational purposes and when they are cognisant of the concerns of educational practitioners, and even then they may need to be recontextualised to make sense within educational contexts. A ‘commitment to quality in educational research’ (BERA 2018, p.4) entails therefore above all an ongoing process of delineating the *educational* in educational research, rather than an ongoing pursuit of methodological sophistication or a requirement for researchers to spend more time investigating whatever teachers and other educators are currently doing.

## Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions in revising this article.

## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Ethical Guidelines

Ethical approval was not required for the work undertaken for this article.

## Conflict of Interest

There author had no conflict of interest in undertaking this research.

## References

- Addis, M. & Winch, C. (2019). Introduction. In Addis, M.; C.Winch (eds.) *Education and Expertise*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Allais, S. (2012). ‘Economics imperialism’, education policy and educational theory. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27 (2), 253-274.
- Bartolomé, L. (1994). Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64 (2), 173-195.
- Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity*. 2nd edn. New York, Rowman and Littlefield.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2018). Close to practice educational research: A BERA statement. London: BERA. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 33-46.
- Deng, Z. (2018). Contemporary curriculum theorizing: crisis and resolution. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50 (6), 691-710.
- Dunne, J. (2005). An intricate fabric: understanding the rationality of practice. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 13 (3), 367-390.
- Furlong, J. (2013). *Education – anatomy of the discipline: rescuing the university project*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Furlong, J. & Whitty, G. (2017). Knowledge traditions in the study of education. In Whitty, G. & J. Furlong (eds.) *Knowledge and the study of education: an international exploration* (pp. 13-57). Didcot: Symposium
- Gabbay J. & May, A. (2004). Evidence based guidelines or collectively constructed “mindlines?” Ethnographic study of knowledge management in primary care. *British Medical Journal*, 329, 1013

- Greenhalgh T., Howick J., & Maskrey N. (2014). Evidence based medicine: a movement in crisis? *British Medical Journal*; 348, 3725
- Hager, P. (2011). Refurbishing MacIntyre's Account of Practice. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 45 (3), 545-561.
- Hager, P. (2013). Practice as a key idea in understanding work-based learning. In Gibbs, P. (ed). *Learning, Work and Practice: New Understandings* (pp.85-103). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Hanrahan, H. (2014). The evolution of engineering knowledge. In Young, M. & Muller, J. *Knowledge, Expertise and the Professions* (pp.109-127). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hopmann, S. (2007). Restrained teaching: The common core of Didaktik. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6 (1), 109–124.
- Hordern, J. (2017a). Bernstein's sociology of knowledge and education(al) studies. In Whitty, G. & J. Furlong (eds.) *Knowledge and the study of education: an international exploration* (pp.191-210). Didcot: Symposium.
- Hordern, J. (2017b). Grammaticality and educational research. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 65 (2), 201-217.
- Labaree, D. (2003). The peculiar problems of preparing educational researchers. *Educational Researcher*, 32 (4), 13-22.
- Lynch, J., Rolands, J., Gale, T. & Skourdoumbis, A. eds. (2017) *Practice theory and education. Diffractive readings in professional practice*. London: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, A. (1994). A partial response to my critics. In Horton, J. & S.Mendus (eds.) *After MacIntyre: critical perspectives on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (pp. 283-304). Cambridge: Polity.
- MacIntyre, A. & Dunne, J. (2002). Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In dialogue with Joseph Dunne. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 36 (1), 1-19.
- MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After Virtue: A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- McCulloch, G. (2018). Educational research: Which way now? *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(2), 175–190.
- Moore, R. & Muller, J. (2002). The growth of knowledge and the discursive gap. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23 (4), 627-637.
- Muller, J. (2007). On splitting hairs: hierarchy, knowledge and the school curriculum. In F. Christie & J. Martin (ed.) *Language, knowledge and pedagogy* (pp.65-86). London: Continuum.
- Muller, J. (2009). Forms of knowledge and curriculum coherence. *Journal of Education and Work*, 22 (3), 205–26.
- Nicolini, D. (2013). *Practice theory, work and organisation: An introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Noddings, N. (2003). Is teaching a practice? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. 37 (2), 241-251.

Paine, L. (2017). Framing Education: cautionary tales from the USA of the relationship between education studies and teacher education. In Whitty, G. & J. Furlong (eds.) *Knowledge and the study of education: an international exploration* (pp.161-187). Didcot: Symposium.

Popper, K. (1963). *Conjectures and Refutations*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul

Rouse, J. (2007). Social Practices and Normativity. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 37(1), 46-56.

Royal Society/British Academy (2018). *Harnessing Educational Research*. London: Royal Society.

Sahlberg, P. (2016). The global educational reform movement and its impact on schooling. In K. Mundy, A. Green, B. Lingard, & A. Verger (Eds.), *The handbook of global education policy* (pp. 128–144). West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.

Schleicher, A. (2011). *Building a High-Quality Teaching Profession: Lessons from around the World*, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264113046-en>

Shalem, Y. & Allais, S. (2019) Polarity in sociology of knowledge: the relationship between disciplinarity, curriculum, and social justice. *The Curriculum Journal*, 30 (2), 144-161

Tatto, M. T. (2006). Education reform and the global regulation of teachers' education, development and work: A cross-cultural analysis. *International Journal of Education Research*, 45 (4-5), 231–241.

Whitty, G. (2006). Education(al) research and education policy-making: is conflict inevitable? *British Educational Research Journal*, 32 (2), 159-176.

Winch, C. (2010). *Dimensions of Expertise: A conceptual exploration of vocational knowledge*. London, Continuum.

Wyse, D., Brown, C., Oliver, S. & Poblete, X. (2018) The BERA Close-to-Practice Research Project: Research Report, London: BERA.

<https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchersresources/publications/bera-statement-on-close-to-practice-research>